Counting Out Time: A Musician's Journey With Genesis

Discovery

It all seems obvious in hindsight.

I was a teenage musician-to-be. Countless hours spent with guitar in hand, hunched over, trying to learn every single note of every single song in Led Zeppelin's canon. Dreaming of being in a band. Wanting to know the "all for one" comradeship that *must* come from that experience.

I was already at a point where I had realized that there were some good musicians playing rock music. Rock had evolved to a point that it could now contain all the elements of an elevated musical artform while still maintaining all the things that made it fun. The Beatles had shown the world that rock could embrace classical, avant-garde, folk, and even British beer hall singalongs. Their songs were mentioned in the same breath as Gershwin. However, it was still *fun*. It was joyous, not academic.

In the early 1980's, most rock and pop was standard fare. Light and breezy ruled the day. MTV had changed everything so that now more than ever image was the most important thing. I, being a Canadian in Toronto, eagerly ran home from school each day to watch host John Majhor and his show "Toronto Rocks". A typical programming day for this show might go as such: first, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper. Pure bubble-gum pop. Upbeat, catchy music, colorful, fast-moving video. Musical breakfast cereal. Second, "Jump" by Van Halen. Hard driving arena rock synth pop. Colorful clothes, lots of smiles and ham and cheese schtick. Tons of quick jump cuts.

Third..."Mama" by Genesis.

It starts with a shadowy woman walking into a bar. The camera tracks up a wall and over to reveal that there is no roof, and the interior behind the wall was like a dirty Mexican cantina. The image is quite a bit like Orson Welles's opening shot in "A Touch of Evil". It's all in sepia tone, muted and dark. A sweaty older man, short and balding, leans against a wall smoking a cigarette. There are other, older musicians, but the focus is on the first man, who we would come to know as the singer.

The music begins with a grinding, mechanical rhythm. Mid-tempo. A long, low, drone...two notes, telling us this is in a minor key (extremely rare for a top ten pop hit) followed by four more, one of which is the major seventh, the EXTREMLY-rare-for-a-top-ten-pop-hit minor major seventh.

Already, in the first 20 seconds of a five minute and fourteen second song (way to long for a top ten pop hit) they have gone against several pop music and pop music video conventions; mid-tempo, minor key, dynamic build (it doesn't hit you with a driving beat off the start. In fact, the song doesn't reach it's emotional and loudness peak until the 3:30 mark, very late for a pop song), sepia and dark muted tones, OLD MEN...how did this song about sexual repression and frustration EVER become a hit?

I knew there was something unusual going on here. I was at a point in my musical development where I was hungry for musical information. I had loved the adventurousness of The Beatles, the progressive leanings of Led Zeppelin, and the complexity of Rush's material. I also loved Van Halen, who gave me musical instrument virtuosity with a Beach Boys-like pop sensibility. But I needed more.

One of my habits back then was to record radio shows on my little radio-cassette deck. I would amass hours of music this way. One of the programs at that time on my favorite station, Toronto's Q107 fm,

was a show where they would play live tracks of bands and "pretend" that it was a real rock festival they were airing. I recorded one and was listening back as usual when something interesting caught my ear.

The song started with a single propulsive repeated eighth note pattern. Pretty standard, until a major two chord came crashing in over top of the single note. Then the flat three chord. Kinda cool, but no big deal.

Then a guitar and piano riff in the major key. Then the same two instruments play a second riff in the parallel minor. A major to minor modulation. More interesting. Then a staccato double hit from all instruments including the drums and the major to minor modulating riff is played in full swing. But wait a minute....the whole thing has a very strong backbeat, but somethings different. I began to count the quarter notes to see where the riff repeated. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.... The way I interpreted the meter was one bar of six and another of seven (in reality, it's 13/8). Very unusual for rock, with its constant insistence on four beats to a bar. But it still FELT like ROCK! The backbeat, as I then heard it, was on beats 2, 4, 6 and then on 2, 4, 6 and 7. This gave it a solid beat, that you could, well, almost dance to. (I was one of those Canadian kids that danced from the neck up).

It was them again. Genesis.

At that time I did not know the terms "major-minor modulation" or "compound time" or "pedal point". I just got what they were doing and loved them for doing it in a way that gave me all the bombast and pop mentality that I needed from rock.

The song was called "Turn It On Again" and I did. Repeatedly. Until the next song came on.

The show would play two live tracks in a row from a band. The second song started with a rippling keyboard arpeggio that was barely audible. The vocals come in, softly...all major key but sad, mournful. The chorus comes in, something about Carpet Crawlers...very moody. Hypnotic. There is a sound that I can't identify behind the vocals, giving a soaring, crying accompaniment. The dynamics begin to grow louder very gradually. This was not what I thought rock bands were capable of, playing so quietly and then building with such complete control. Finally, the band hit full stride in intensity and volume with the lyric "Mild mannered Supermen are held in kryptonite and the wise and foolish virgins giggle with their bodies glowing bright..."

At that moment this fifteen year old boy was completely hooked.

It turns out the unidentifiable sound was in fact an electric guitar, very thoroughly overdriven and distorted but played very quietly behind the singer. I did not know you could sustain notes on a distorted guitar for that long and that quietly. (I thought distorted guitars had to be played loud). But it was more than that. It was *what* he played, weaving around the vocals without ever drawing attention to himself, creating something so hugely important to the music but that most people would not even notice, that had me spellbound.

The song fades, but not in the standard way of a studio fade out, but by the musicians playing softer and softer, with control and finesse, until the last chord.

The sound of the crowd afterwards is absolutely deafening in comparison. They managed to keep their audience, a ROCK audience, captivated and in the palm of their hands until the final moment, when the crowd was released and allowed to voice their appreciation.

I had never known rock music quite like this in my life. It was incredible. But there was still one further moment that needed to happen before I was really changed by this band.

Again, I had been recording radio. It was late on a Saturday night that the DJ announced they would be playing a song by Genesis after the break, so I was ready. However, I didn't feel like listening at the time and I remember thinking to myself that I would record it and have it to listen to in the morning. The radio-cassette recorder would still record the music from the radio onto the cassette with the sound off (don't ask me how) so I turned off the sound and went to sleep.

I didn't get around to listening to it until the next afternoon.

It started off with some guitars playing chords I didn't understand and sounded alien to me. The melody was complex and hard to follow. The music kept moving in several different directions. It seemed long and there were no drums. The guitars kept chiming away on chords, it meandered, it didn't seem focused...I was quite disappointed. And it was LONG. I turned it off around ten minutes in.

However, later in the day, I found myself thinking about it. The guitars were playing some very dense chords that I wanted to figure out. Let me hear that again....no, it's boring, I don't get it. Turn it off. Later still, I find myself hearing the vocal melody, or a fragment of it, in my head. Let me hear that again...hey, wait a minute, didn't they sing that part earlier in the song, only differently? And that flute line at that section, that's what they call a *reprise*, I think, of the very first melody. And isn't a reprise the kind of thing they do in classical music? Now what are they doing? A section that sounds like a twisted and darkly warped Beatles tune that comes in out of nowhere and sings about "Winston Churchill dressed in drag, he used to be a British flag, plastic bag, what a drag". Surrealism? I'm in over my head here. The bass, drums and guitar start to play a repeated rhythm. I can tell it's in an odd time signature, but I don't bother to figure it out. I know I'll have time later, because by this point I already realized that I was in for the full ride here. The keyboard plays lines that modulate from major to minor and uses circle of fifths stuff (again, I was unfamiliar with the exact musical theories being used, but I did know *something* interesting was happening). It reaches terrific melodic and dynamic peaks and valleys.

It was here that I had a major realization. These guys <u>really were</u> different than other rock bands in many ways, but here was probably the most significant; other bands would play solos overtop of already introduced chord progressions, but <u>Genesis composed entirely new pieces of music in these sections</u>.

This changed everything. I got it. It's a composer's art, a composer's band.

Now it meant (to me) that as well as your instrumental skills you could apply your full musical self to your work. Yes, these guys could play, they could solo, the instrumental virtuosity was there when needed, but they chose not to apply it <u>in favor of what best served the music</u>.

By the time the song "Supper's Ready" reached the biblical quote "The Lord of Lords, King of Kings has returned to lead his children home to take them to the New Jerusalem" at the end of the song, I had a new view of what kind of musician I wanted to be. From before the first hearing of "Mama" I knew that I wanted to grow as a musician, and here, finally, was the band that showed me how I could do that, giving it to me in a way I understood but still challenged me. This is what makes sense in hindsight. For me to grow I needed something to challenge my sensibilities, to show me there were other ways to express my full and complete self musically. So many things about Genesis were very different that at

first I didn't like it. However what they were doing was so strong and my musical curiosity was so powerful that I couldn't stay away.

Fandom

I tried to explain my fascination with this group to several of my musically talented friends. Most of us were learning music of the day; The Police/Sting, Prince, Van Halen, and for the more gifted it would be Rush, XTC, and of course always The Beatles. We spent hours playing guitars, learning the riffs of our heroes, and even more time partying to our favorite songs.

I would try to tell some of my friends about Genesis and how incredible they were, but for the most part the only reaction I would get was indifference. Putting "The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway" on at a party went over like a lead balloon (and nothing at all like a Led Zeppelin). There was no way that I could convince people that Peter Gabriel wearing a flower head mask and strutting around was in way cool, certainly not compared to David Lee Roth jumping up and doing the splits in assless chaps. My friends got my passion, but not the music.

It wasn't until a little later in high school that I met another Genesis fan. His name was Dave. He had a very non-descript look, all discount store work shirts and jeans. His hair had no real cut to it and hung in front of his eyes behind his glasses. He had terrible acne, something of a bad odor and I swear he wore a pocket protector for his ever-present pens (I *may* have embellished this part over time).

You get the picture.

However, he was the first real Genesis fan I had ever met. He understood the musical dynamics of the band. He was able to tell me where the literary references for "Watcher Of The Skies" and "The Cinema Show" came from. My experience in meeting Dave made me realize that there was something of a "member's only" quality to being a Genesis fan. I should say here that I mean a fan of Genesis's older pioneering progressive rock years with Peter Gabriel as their singer, and some, only some, of their post-Gabriel material. It was almost as if you would meet another fan (I would meet more of "us") with something like a Vulcan hand greeting and say "Live long and prosper".

Dave and I would not become close but it was then that I realized that there was something both good and bad about this kind of fandom. On the one hand I knew that there was something special about this band. On the other, I didn't like the "secret society" aspect of it. Try as I might though, I was never quite able to convince the doubters just how incredible this music was.

I didn't feel that I fit in with their fanbase, yet I knew they were my favorite band bar none. So fandom for me became something where I could have my own love for the group, as if the world of Genesis was my personal and private place.

Dave of course did not personify every Genesis fan I would meet. I have since met many people who like them and many great musicians who site them as a favorite and an influence, but what I learned was that it didn't matter one way or the other how people felt about their music, what mattered was how I felt about it. It was deeply personal. So when Genesis began doing music later in their career that I did not care for I felt on one hand that I really wished they would return to what I loved about them and would buy their releases in hope that there would be *some* remnants of their older music on there

(there always was, but finding it was like panning for gold), yet on the other hand I didn't really mind because I could always just put on "Selling England By The Pound" whenever I pleased. It was already mine. Also, I couldn't help but feel a different kind of respect for them. I understood that they were growing as people and as musicians too.

I no longer wanted to play the hard rock songs I had first learned, so how could I expect them to keep writing the same type of material that they had written fifteen years ago?

I appreciated them even more because of their need for growth, which I saw as something like my own.

It was in this sprit that in 1986 I bought a ticket for my very first rock concert, Genesis at Toronto's CNE. Genesis by this point had developed a part of their show where they would do what was called the "In The Cage" medley. "In The Cage" was a song from the album "The Lamb Dies Down On Broadway" onto which they would attach a different medley of their older instrumental material. This medley would usually be about twenty minutes long, and it was for this that I happily paid my $25.00. I could enjoy lots of the other stuff (particularly the bits of "gold"), but that medley was why I was there.

At this concert I noticed something that made me very happy. During the concert there were many other people like myself who were appreciative but not particularly excited during the majority of the concert but who then jumped to their feet and roared *en masse* to Tony Banks's opening chords and Phil Collins singing "I've got sunshine...in my stomach..." signalling the beginning of the medley, the only section of the concert that was "*for us*". So, in some way I really did appreciate that "secret society', knowing that there were others there like me, but what was also great was that there was an entirely new group of people who had come for the "hits" but were hearing this music I loved so much.

The moment was capped when a young woman who saw me enthusiastically clapping and singing along asked me "what are they playing?" I of course was more than happy to explain, to which she responded "Wow. Cool".

Welcome weary traveller. Prosperity and Long Life.

Fading Lights

Time goes by.

I move forward as a musician. I become fascinated with other things; Cuban music, then jazz. I stop listening to the older music of Genesis and have no interest in their modern work, even though I still deeply respected them. However, I would eventually return to their music from the early to mid 1970's and found that I liked it even more. It was only after I had more experience as a musician that I realized strong they really were. And how brave.

A musician should be allowed some forgiveness for some of the naivete of their early work. Youthful innocence can lead to overly ambitious idealism and awkwardness. But for them to be so brave at such

an early age to do things that their peers were not doing, to honestly have a unique sound, to be both of their time and separate from it, to be demanding of yourselves and your audience, was truly inspiring.

I had wanted to be a musician since I was nine, became a professional one at twenty-one, and am still one today. I can honestly say there are only a handful of times that I have ever made music that was truly unique. Most of the time has been spent pursuing the professional side. When I think about who embodies the essence of originality for me, who the artist in me aspires to be like, it is the members of Genesis of the early 1970's.

Now as we all grow older I am saddened by the fact that they have finished their final tour. At least one of the members is in very bad health. Some of the others are writing their memoirs. I can't help but feel my own age, as these heroes of mine step down after the final curtain. It's sobering to see your idols facing the same passing of time that we all face. This awareness of our shared humanity and our mortality is saddening. However, I have had and continue to have a life full of music, which still gives me so many incredible rewards. I am still deeply influenced by their work, although it wouldn't seem that way on the surface.

In a recent interview that all five of the "classic" era of Genesis attended they seemed in high spirits as they sat and told stories. Tales of broken-down bread-vans-turned-into-tour-buses, eating meals out of coolers and naked roadies appearing on stage were peppered with full throated laughter. They were enjoying a momentary look back.

Tony Banks, Mike Rutherford and Peter Gabriel are all still making new music. Steve Hackett tours with his band playing the classic early Genesis material. They all seem happy, satisfied, and are still finding joy in being creative.

I have grown and been through many life changes and find at this stage in life I am more creative than I have been in years. Their influence is still in me. When I want to put a little "something unusual" in a piece of music I think of how they would put in thrilling, exciting and completely unexpected bits in. That adventurous spirit keeps my music fresh even today.

They have their memories and their lives and I have mine. I have had my musical life, they have had theirs and although we have never met our lives have something in common.

Music.